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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MOSCOW 000848

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [RS](#) [IR](#) [IQ](#) [MEP](#)
SUBJECT: DFM SALTANOV ON MOSCOW CONFERENCE, SYRIA, IRAN,
HAMAS, IRAQ

Classified By: Political M/C Alice G. Wells for reasons 1.4 (b,d)

¶1. (C) Summary: In a March 20 meeting with visiting Senate Foreign Relations Committee Senior Staff Member Talwar, DFM Saltanov reviewed Russia's position on a range of critical issues in the Middle East, underscoring strong U.S.-Russian cooperation in the lead up to and following the Annapolis Conference. Saltanov commented on the challenges of organizing the Moscow conference, citing the "divided rule" of the Palestinian territories and the reluctance of many key players, including Israel, to hold the conference as the most formidable hurdles. He supported focusing the Moscow Conference on the multilateral track, but strongly advocated adding to the agenda the Israeli-Syrian track, and in general greater international engagement with Syria, Iran, and Hamas. Saltanov also stressed Russia's interest in ratcheting up its involvement in Iraq, but would be conditioned on U.S. willingness to focus more on national reconciliation and the establishment of a realistic timetable for troop withdrawal. End summary.

Annapolis Conference Instrumental

¶2. (C) In a one and one-half hour meeting with visiting Senior Foreign Relations Committee Staff Member Puneet Talwar, DFM Anatoliy Saltanov highlighted the overlapping interests and sustained cooperation between the U.S. and Russia in the Middle East. Saltanov pointed out that the cooperation intensified "leading up to, during, and following the useful Annapolis Conference," and assured Talwar that Russia was ready to continue such engagement with the U.S. with the outgoing and future U.S. administrations.

¶3. (C) Saltanov noted that the main obstacle to reaching a comprehensive peace agreement was the lack of trust between the Israelis and Arab countries, but stressed that Annapolis made an important contribution in the settlement of the conflicts in the region, and in particular, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. He confirmed that FM Lavrov traveled to Syria on March 19 and was en route to Israel on March 20 to follow up on Annapolis and encourage all parties to reach "concrete agreements." Saltanov observed that PM Olmert and PNA President Abbas suffered from "narrow political space in which to maneuver," but was encouraged that both leaders seemed committed to "do their part" to reach a settlement.

Moscow Conference: An Organizational Nightmare

¶4. (C) When asked about GOR plans for a possible post-Annapolis conference in Moscow, Saltanov admitted that the organization of the conference "was becoming very complicated" and was reluctant to speculate on timing. He cited as the most formidable hurdles the "divided rule" of

the Palestinian territories (between the PNA and Hamas) and the reluctance of many key players, including Israel, to hold the conference in the next few months.

¶15. (C) On the substance of the conference, Saltanov argued that the Moscow conference should focus on the multilateral track, noting that discussions with the Arab countries on "critical issues" like economic development, water, and energy resources could boost the Arab world's "respect" for Israeli concerns. Following his trip to region, Lavrov would consult with the Secretary and Quartet on timing and content, and the Quartet would make a final decision.

But We Need to Engage Syria...

¶16. (C) Saltanov echoed Lavrov's views that the Israeli-Syrian track should also be incorporated into the agenda of the Moscow Conference. Saltanov underscored the importance of pushing Israel and Syria to at least start a dialogue, which could later lead to substantive negotiations. Saltanov argued that the international community would observe a shift in its relationship with Iran and a dramatic change in Syria's activities in Lebanon and Iraq, if Israel agreed to engage on Golan Heights. He stressed that a "policy of pressure and isolation" toward Syria is not only "useless, but destructive."

¶17. (C) Talwar inquired about Russia's views on the upcoming tribunal examining the assassination of former Lebanese President Hariri. Saltanov stressed that Putin has consistently stated publicly and privately that the tribunal should get to the bottom of the assassination, even it means implicating Syria, as long as the process is not politicized.

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Saltanov positively assessed the work of the previous and current tribunal commissioner.

...And Iran

¶18. (C) Saltanov strongly advocated for the international community's engagement with Iran, stressing that Russia finds Iran a "complicated but necessary" partner. Saltanov asserted that Iran was also interested in a stable and unified Lebanon, Palestinian state, and Iraq, but only by way of peaceful and comprehensive negotiations. On Iraq, Saltanov commented that, "obviously," Iran was guided by its own strategic interests and those interests "needed to be tempered," but argued that Iran was careful not to exacerbate tensions with Sunni-majority Arab countries by meddling too much in Iraq. Saltanov added that Iran has also exercised restraint in its relations with Shiite enclaves in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, the UAE, but acknowledged that Iran's continued restraint hinged on further developments in the region and in Iran itself.

¶19. (C) Commenting on Iranian domestic politics, Saltanov argued that the outcome of the March 14 Majles elections demonstrated the negative effects of strong international pressure on Iran. He posited that the conservatives won the lion's share of parliamentary seats mainly because the Iranian people, perceiving that the international community "was bent on regime change and isolating Iran," rallied around the conservatives. "More international pressure equates to less popular support the reformists," he argued. Thus, dialogue with Iran was a fundamental element of Russian foreign policy, and Saltanov called on the U.S. to adopt a similar position.

¶10. (C) When asked to what extent Russia was prepared to block Iran's nuclear ambitions, Saltanov said that the international community should wait to see how Iran responds to the positive elements in the P5 1 Ministerial Statement that accompanied the latest UNSC resolution on Iran.

Categorically rejecting a "military solution" to the Iranian nuclear problem, Saltanov said Russia favored more clearly laying out for the Iranians the concrete benefits of cooperation with the international community in exchange for suspension of uranium enrichment.

...And Hamas

11. (C) Saltanov observed that there were many "skeptics in Israel, Arab world, and other places" who doubt that PNA President Abbas lacks the authority to negotiate an enduring political settlement, underscoring that Hamas' control over Gaza has significantly weakened his mandate. Saltanov agreed with Talwar that Abbas was particularly concerned that engagement by the international community with Hamas would mean the further weakening of Abbas' authority, but argued that Hamas represented a significant part of the Palestinian "political spectrum" and thus had to be engaged.

12. (C) Recognizing the radical elements in Hamas, Saltanov claimed that Russia's sustained contacts with Hamas revealed that some elements of the Hamas leadership were "secular, pragmatic, and generally not hopeless." He cited as an example Hamas' willingness to agree to a cease-fire with Israel in exchange for GOI assurances of no future military operations in the Palestinian territories. However, Saltanov argued that Israel, not Hamas, "undid" the agreement, which was mediated by the Egyptians, when it recently launched another surgical strike in Gaza. Saltanov commented that continued pressure on and isolation of the Hamas leadership only strengthened the hand of the radical elements.

Russia Willing To Play a Greater Role in Iraq

13. (C) In the event the next administration took a "fundamentally different" approach to Iraq, Saltanov stressed Russia would be willing to play a more active role in Iraq. He noted that a stable Iraq was in Russia's national interests -- Russia did not want terrorist activities in Iraq to infiltrate Russian territory and Russia had significant economic interests in the country.

14. (C) However, Saltanov stated Russia would "unquestionably and enthusiastically" step up its involvement in Iraq if two conditions were met. First, greater emphasis must be placed on efforts to achieve national reconciliation. Saltanov noted Russia's sustained efforts to encourage the opposition forces in Iraq to reach a compromise with the

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Maliki government. Second, a timetable for the withdrawal of foreign troops must be established. He argued that opposition forces insist on such a timetable as the basis for serious negotiations with the Iraqi government. Saltanov reiterated the GOR position that the timetable should be "realistic," which meant that troop withdrawal should not be immediate.

15. (U) This cable was cleared by Puneet Talwar.
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